

The Idea of Self in Virginia Woolf's Novels

Chiyoko Mukai

(1)

This essay will examine Virginia Woolf's idea about 'self'. In my opinion Virginia Woolf's mysticism derives from her tendency to concentrate herself on the world of the individual and then to try to transcend the isolated individual's world in order to get in touch with the outside society. Her idea about 'self' finds its first clear expression in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), is developed more thoroughly in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928), and finds its fullest expression in *The Waves* (1931). Later in *The Years* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941) she struggles to communicate her vision of 'self' to other people and expresses the difficulty of this communication.

Furthermore I will concentrate my discussion on *The Waves*, but before I begin, I will look briefly at how her idea of 'self' is expressed in her earlier novels. One of the most important scenes in *Mrs. Dalloway* is the scene where Mrs. Dalloway contemplates her face in a mirror.

How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same imperceptible contraction! She pursed her lips when she looked in

the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self—pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives....she... had tried to be the same always, never showing a sign of all the other sides of her—faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions... (p. 42)*¹

Here Mrs. Dalloway shows herself to be aware of various phases of herself—which may be divided into two groups: the part of herself which she herself knows and tries to hide from others and the other part which people see as Mrs. Dalloway. We may call the former as the inner self and the latter as the social self, although we should remember that both are recognized not as a singular being but as plural beings. Mrs. Dalloway is conscious of the gap between the two—and makes clear this distinction by calling one, Mrs. Dalloway, and the other, Clarissa. For both Mrs. Dalloway and Virginia Woolf, the personal self is a far larger and richer existence than the social self, the former only occupying a small part of the latter. Having this distinction in mind, I think it very significant that this novel ends with Peter's revelational monologue, 'It is Clarissa, he said. / For there she was' (p. 213).

Concerning the inner self or selves, another important idea in *Mrs. Dalloway* is Clarissa's transcendental theory introduced through Peter's consciousness.

It was unsatisfactory, they agreed, how little one knew people. But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftsbury Avenue, she felt herself

everywhere, not “here, here”; and she tapped the back of the seat, but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftsbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them, even the places.....It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed.....that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places, after death (p.168).

This is to say that one's real self is the sum total of one's experiences, both physical and spiritual, and one's own body is only a part of one's real self. The real self includes the people and things that one loves and has loved, so some part of one's existence will remain in those people and things even after one's physical death. In other words this means that our spirit is more important than our body. This is a very spiritualistic idea, but I suppose that this might probably be very ordinary in the Christian World. But in Virginia Woolf's case, as she is an atheist, her idea becomes rather unique.

This same idea is expressed in *To the Lighthouse* through Mrs.Ramsay's contemplation while sitting alone knitting and sometimes looking at the lights of the Lighthouse.

When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless. And to everybody there was always this sense of unlimited resources, she supposed; one after another, she, Lily, Augustus Carmichael, must feel, our apparitions, the things you know us by, are

simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon seemed to her limitless. (pp.99-100)

Mrs. Ramsay thinks that the true self is the existence underlying the everyday self. This existence may be called either the spirit or the soul. As the story in Part III in this novel concerns the Ramsay family about ten years after Mrs. Ramsay's death, Woolf succeeds in conveying her idea that one can live in other people's minds even after one's death through the depiction of Mrs. Ramsay's remaining effects upon other people. But even at this stage we can sense Woolf's weak point as a spiritualist. Although Mrs. Ramsay is a superb woman, beautiful and clever, she is influential only in a limited circle, so this fact gives rise to criticism that this novel is sentimental and trivial. In "Modern Fiction" (1918) Woolf has accused Edwardian novelists such as Arnold Bennet, John Galsworthy and H.G. Wells, of being materialists. But she could be similarly accused of being a spiritualist if she cannot convey a connection between the spiritual world (which is represented in her novel through her characters' consciousness) and the material world. I think she has succeeded in representing this connection, but she never makes a special effort to convince people of the importance of this spiritual world, because of her aesthetic belief that work of art should not be propaganda.

In her next novel, *Orlando* the hero(ine) Orlando lives for hundreds of years, changing his(her) sex from male to female in the middle of his(her) life. The important idea of 'self' appears near the end of this fantasy novel. *² Woolf says that one's self is not a single being but the accumulation of thousands of different selves. They pile up one on top of another like a pile of plates. Different kinds of these selves appear on the surface

in various times and places. Millions of selves are included in one person, so the best a biographer can do is to suggest several selves out of them. On the other hand, it is certain that there exists one Capital self or a Key self which controls the other diversified selves. This is a very interesting and persuasive argument. It is persuasive because it seems to reflect the psychological ideas in her time. We know that the Hogarth Press published Sigmund Freud's work in English and it is certain that Woolf read Freud's work. But, unlike Freud, Woolf does not show keen concern with the idea of 'ego'. In this light novel, the emphasis is rather on the wide variety of selves. As the period of writing *The Waves* (1927-'31) coincides with that of writing *Orlando* (1927-'28), the idea about self in this work can be thought to be the same in *The Waves*.

(2)

Now let us look at *The Waves*, keeping in mind Woolf's idea of the above-mentioned ideas of self. Among the characters in this work Percival is not the speaker of monologues, but has an existence like that of Jacob in *Jacob's Room* or Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. Percival is loved by the six main characters, the speakers of monologues, and keeps on living through his strong influence upon them after his death. There are three important moments in this novel; two of them are about the state of communion between the six characters, something which rarely occurs in their lives. In these scenes, the idea that the deep roots of our various selves are connected into one can be found. In *Orlando* Woolf insists that there are millions of selves in one single person, but here in *The Waves* she says that in the depth of our existence we share the same past, present, and future. I do not think these two views contradict each other.

Millions of our selves are our ordinary appearances or our surface beings, whereas our common root is something mysterious like our soul. I will quote here a passage from Louis's monologue.

"It is Percival," said Louis, "sitting silent as he sat among the tickling grasses when the breeze parted the clouds and they formed again, who makes us aware that these attempts to say, 'I am that,' which we make, coming together, like separated parts of one body and soul, are false. Something has been left out from fear. Something has been altered, from vanity. We have tried to accentuate differences. From the desire to be separate we have laid stress upon our faults, and what is particular to us. But there is a chain whirling round, round, in a steel-blue circle beneath." (p.98)

What is expressed as 'a steel-blue circle' here is the same notion as 'a wedge-shaped core of darkness' which appears on the same page of the above quotation from *To the Lighthouse*. It is the true self. The same notion is again expressed as 'a globe' on p.104 and also leads to Bernard's image of 'a many-faceted flower' on pp.90-91.

"We are drawn into this communion by some deep, some common emotion. Shall we call it, conveniently, 'Love'? Shall we say 'love of Percival' because Percival is going to India?

"No, that is too small, too particular a name. We cannot attach the width and spread of our feelings to so small a mark. We have come together.....to make one thing, not enduring—for what endures?—but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven sided flower,

many petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves—
a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution.”

(pp. 90-91)

The same image of a ‘many-faceted flower’ appears later when the six main characters, now middle-aged, meet at a restaurant, at Humpton Court.*³ We should notice that this is not only the symbol of what is caught intuitively at the moment of communion between people but also that of the life and self in Bernard’s summing up at the end of this novel.

However, before our examination of Bernard’s so-called ‘summing up’, I would like to pause here in order to explain Woolf’s ideas more clearly in terms of modern psychology. In modern psychology, for example in Freud, there is a clear distinction between ego and self. On the other hand, in Woolf’s world there are a lot of selves in one person and the true self, which contains all of these other selves and which pertains to a far wider and much deeper existence, one with limitless potentiality. For me this idea of true self in Woolf seems to be quite similar to C.G. Jung’s idea, because according to Jung our ‘ego’ is a part of our true ‘self’ and consists of the uppermost part of our consciousness. But our consciousness is wider than our ego. The true self includes not only our consciousness but also our unconsciousness which contains a universal collective unconsciousness beyond our individual unconsciousness.*⁴ It is not certain if Woolf read Jung, but it is certain that they share the same idea. We should also notice that Jung also uses the image of a globe to express his idea of self. On first thought it may seem strange that both the image of ‘self’ and that of the moment of communion are depicted by using the same image of a ‘globe’, but it would cease to be strange if we accepted Jung’s idea of ‘self’ which transcends the personal range of unconsciousness. Louis’s

awareness that he is holding the memory of human history of the past in himself*⁵ can be explained by this idea.

Now I will return to Bernard's monologue from the last part of *The Waves* as the final summing up.

"The crystal, the globe of life as one calls it, far from being hard and cold to the touch, has walls of thinnest air. If I press them all will burst. . . . Faces recur, faces and faces—they press their beauty to the walls of my bubble—Neville, Susan, Louis, Jinny, Rhoda and a thousand others." (p. 182)

About ten pages later the same idea is expressed in a different way like this.

"Our friends, how seldom visited, how little known—it is true; and yet, when I meet an unknown person, and try to break off, here at this table, what I call 'my life', it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am—Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs." (p. 196)

Bernard is aware that in his life there are contained other people's lives, which causes him to feel that, because of this (the absorbing of other people's lives), the nature of his own self seems to become more and more transparent. So he has to ask himself if it is living or death to continue to live like this.

"Was this, then, this streaming away mixed with Susan, Jinny,

Neville, Rhoda, Louis, a sort of death? A new assembly of elements? Some hint of what was to come?" (p.198)

Hidekatsu Nojima in *Muse and Destiny—Study of Virginia Woolf*^{*6} asserts that it is death, but for Woolf it seems that this is not death but a new revelation. It is a moment of a new revelation that individual lives are not living fragmentally but streaming together in our history, supplementing and connecting with each other, and through this cognition Woolf, who is often thought as a most anti-social writer, good at representing the isolated individual world, finally finds and declares a bond between the writer or the individual and society.

I can understand why so many critics tend to criticize this idea of self as 'a sort of death', for it is the experience of losing one's so-called 'ego' and nobody can live in this state. We can only have a glimpse of our 'true self' in a rare moment of revelation, since in our ordinary life we dwell in the world of consciousness and are one with our so-called egos. The submergence into the unconsciousness is to submerge into the 'Big Self' in the view of Eastern philosophy. Through this submergence one gets a new energy and after acquiring this energy we have to go back to our everyday life, and live the life of so-called 'Small Self', which is the same with 'ego'. In my opinion Woolf is an atheistic mystic who doesn't accept the idea of God, and in the centre of her idea there exists 'emptiness' or 'nothingness'. But that 'emptiness' or 'nothingness' is not that found in Western ideology but that which resembles the idea of 'Kuu' (emptiness) in Eastern philosophy. It is like the existence of Percival in this novel, an empty centre, surrounded by the people who continue to love him after his death.

Woolf writes the following entry at the beginning of her first draft^{*7} of *The Waves*:

July 2nd 1929

The Moths?

or the life of anybody

life in general

or } moments of Being

or } The Waves (Draft 1, p.1)

While I do not treat it in this essay, this idea of ‘moments of Being’^{*8} is fraught with implication and associated with her aesthetics. This entry tells us of her original intention in this work, namely to depict the life of anybody or anonymity. In other words, it is the life of common people. In this sense *The Waves* is a very abstract work. Here we can find not only her idea of self which I have already explained but also the idea of the artist’s ‘Negative Capability’ which John Keats insists on in his letters. For example, Keats says in a letter to Benjamin Bailey on the 22nd of November in 1817 that men of genius ‘have not any individuality, any determined character’.^{*9} Again in a letter to George and Tom Keats written on the 21st of December in the same year he writes as follows:

...several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason...^{*10}

Bernard, the novelist, in *The Waves* is a character who has Negative Capability. He is able to attain a universality transcending the boundary of the individuality, and in this state he loses his own individuality, which is the ideal state of a matured artist.

Woolf tries to develop this idea of 'anybody's life' in her later novels. While her description in *The Waves* is too poetic and abstract, she tries to keep in touch with real history and society in *The Years* and *Between the Acts*. But this is the natural development of her idea expressed in *The Waves* in spite of the fact that there are some critics who insist that it is not a development but a retreat. In these novels she attempts to represent the whole view of general life, which is based on her vision of attaining universality through submergence into the inner world of self.

In *The Second Sex* (1949) Simone de Beauvoir points out that those women who are shut out from living in the actual world tend to become mystics. Woolf's mysticism which is somewhat similar to that of Emily Brontë's is nurtured by immersing herself in an isolated individual world retreating from an actual active life. In the case of Emily Brontë she challenges the real world by means of her radical mysticism, which continues to challenge us even in this century. Then what about Woolf's mysticism? Is her mysticism not powerful enough, or does she admit defeat, because a strong sense of despair and pessimism can be noticed in her last two novels? It is true that, while writing these novels at the time when Europe was on the eve of World War II and under the threat of fascists and dictators, she felt desperate and had a strong sense of helplessness as an artist, which is well conveyed through the description of the artist Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts*. But even in this desperate state Woolf never gives up her role as an artist, which is compellingly expressed in the final part of *Three Guineas* (1937) when she talks about the role of poets since the begin-

ning of history.

But with your letter before us we have reason to hope.....Even here, even now your letter tempts us to shut our ears to these little facts, these trivial details, to listen not to the bark of the guns and bray of the gramophones but to the voices of the poets, answering each other, assuring us of a unity that rubs out divisions as if they were chalk marks only; to discuss with you the capacity of the human spirit to overflow boundaries and make unity out of multiplicity. But that would be to dream—to dream the recurring dream that has haunted the human mind since the beginning of time; the dream of peace, the dream of freedom. (p. 259)

Woolf is not the anti-social writer as many critics tend to believe. She is the writer who has a strong sense of society and who realizes and insists on the close relationship between the individual and innermost life and the society or the public world. Woolf is one of those artists who firmly sticks to their recurring dreams, haunting them since the beginning of history, 'the dream of peace, the dream of freedom'.

— NOTES —

1. All the page numbers used here are according to the Hogarth Press edition.
2. cf. pp. 277-9, *Orlando*.
3. p. 162, *The Waves*.
4. pp. 61-8, Frieda Fordham, *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology*, Penguin Books, 1953.
5. pp. 136-7, *The Waves*.
6. Hidekatsu Nojima: *Muse and Destiny—Study of Virginia Woolf*, Tokyo: Nanundo Press, 1962.
7. *Virginia Woolf—The Waves—The Two holograph drafts*, ed. J. W. Graham, Univ.

of Toronto Press, 1976.

8. *Moments of Being*, first published by Sussex University Press, 1976, gives us a clear vision about her idea of 'moments of being'. The most important essay is 'A Sketch of the Past'.
9. p.184, *The Letters of John Keats* vol.1, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, Cambridge UP, 1958.
10. p.193, *Ibid*.